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IFAS EXTENSION

So You Want to Be a Farmer

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Many of us dream of slowing down, living out in the country and being self sustaining. In other words, being a farmer. For some this is possible, but the ability to reach such a goal is not for everyone.

The growing of local conventional crops such as cotton, peanuts and livestock is basically out of the question unless you are one of the fortunate few with access to high acreage at a relatively low price.

The so-called "specialty crops" or alternative crops are the only way to go for most people who wish to produce agricultural commodities on a few acres. In other words, the choices are limited to those crops with potentially high gross returns per acre. Some examples of such crops include the production of blackberries, blueberries, grapes, bait minnows, goats, specialty vegetables, sod, poultry and plant liners.

Presently, these farms represent about 15% of all farm sales in Florida. Input from counties throughout the state identified the need for small farm educational programs to be developed. Small farmers and allied organizations have identified critical issues facing small farms. The issues include: access to profitable markets, business skills development, accessible technical information and alternative crops and enterprises.

Anyone with interest in becoming a "small farmer" should begin with a lot of research. The number one question that must be answered is: "If I produce it, who will buy it and at what price?" The technology of producing many commodities is available, but the biggest challenge is in the marketing. Nothing is gained by producing something that can't be sold at a profit.

Other considerations include the required investment costs in land, equipment and supplies. Also, what is your background? Those with a background in agriculture sometimes have a leg up on newcomers in that there is at least some knowledge of equipment and its use, soils and basic cultural practices. On the other hand, persons without an agricultural background sometimes succeed because they might take a more objective approach, without preconceived ideas about how things are done on a small farm.

The economic contribution of small farms is being recognized at the national, state and local level and most land grant universities are directing resources toward creating and gathering useful information. The University of Florida has created a small farm website that contains a wealth of information for anyone interested in agricultural production on a few acres. The site address is <http://smallfarms.ifas.ufl.edu>. Farmers or potential farmers using this site can select topics on enterprises of special interest to them. Each topic includes information on production, marketing and economics as well as other appropriate links. Another good site dealing with alternative crops can be

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found at the North Florida Research and Education Center, Suwannee Valley at Live Oak, Florida. That site address is <http://nfrec-sv.ifas.ufl.edu/>.

A program is being planned locally for those who are interested in specialty crop production. “The Gulf Coast Agribusiness Conference – Growing for the Future” will be held at the Jay Community Center on Thursday, February 9, 2006. Watch for announcements and more specifics concerning this meeting as the time draws near.